HAPPINESS IS DOING
WHAT YOU ARE SUPPOSED TO DO
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Psalm 68:4–10
John 17:6–10
Jeremiah 1:4–10

"Before you were born I consecrated you;
I appointed you a prophet to the nations."
Jeremiah 1:5 (NRSV)

You are—strange though it may seem, almost as hard to believe as the resurrection itself—accomplishing something that will become in due course part of God's new world. Every act of love, gratitude, and kindness; every work of art or music inspired by the love of God and delight in the beauty of his creation; every minute teaching a severely handicapped child to read or walk; every act of care and nurture, of comfort and support, for one's fellow human beings; and,
of course, every prayer, every deed that spreads the gospel and builds up the church . . .
all of this will find its way, through the resurrecting power of God,
into the new creation that God will one day make.

N.T. Wright
Bishop of Durham
Surprised by Hope

How do you know what you are supposed to do with your life? There is perhaps no more important question, regardless of where you happen to be on the journey: facing a decision about graduate school and career; working hard at your job and continuing to wonder whether it is the right one; approaching retirement, when the work that has occupied you and, in a very real sense, defined you is coming to an end and you're wondering about what you will do with the rest of your life.

There is no more important matter than this. The one question that we pastors are most frequently asked over the years is, "How did you decide to be a minister?" The assumption is that God spoke dramatically and clearly in the middle of the night, in a resonate baritone voice, a little like the late Charlton Heston, and told us the plan. It always reminds me of that day long

ago when, having put the decision off as long as possible, I had to declare myself. One of the questions the presbytery asks is, “Do you, in your heart, know yourself called by God to ministry?” There were two of us that day, college seniors. The other young man explained in concise terms how God wanted him to be a Presbyterian minister and go to Princeton Seminary. When my turn came I mumbled something about being interested in theology, liking and wanting to help people, and intending to go to the University of Chicago, where, at the time, nobody seemed to much care about what you would actually do with the theological education provided. They approved both of us, an act of sheer grace if there ever was one. It was a cold, snowy day, I recall, and everybody wanted to go home.

There is no more important matter, and the Bible and the Judeo-Christian tradition actually have a lot to say about it. The innocent little story in the first chapter of the book of the Prophet Jeremiah, for instance: The year is 627 B.C.E., the thirteenth year of the reign of Josiah, the king. Jeremiah is a boy, the son of a priest, and in this instance God does speak directly and precisely:

> “Before I formed you . . . I knew you, . . . consecrated you;
> I appointed you to be a prophet to the nations.”

And then comes young Jeremiah’s wonderfully human response: “Thank you very much, but no thanks. You see, I don’t know the first thing about public speaking; crowds make me nervous. And besides, I’m just a boy. So no thanks.”

In the Bible, God summons, calls; the one summoned resists. When God came to Moses and told him his job was to go to Egypt, confront Pharaoh, and lead the people to freedom, Moses said, in effect, “Who me? I’m just a shepherd, a working man. I’m not eloquent. I have trouble putting words together. I stutter. Besides I’m happy right here, tending these goats. You really ought to find someone else, someone more qualified.”

In the Bible, God summons; the one summoned resists; God persists—won’t take no for an answer—and then makes a promise: “You’re not in this alone. I’ll be with you every step of the way.”

“Don’t say you’re only a boy,” God tells young Jeremiah, “You shall go to those to whom I send you and say what I want you to say. Do not be afraid of them; I will be with you.”

Deep in our tradition is the conviction, based on scripture and Christian experience, that this matter is not only important to us, but close to the heart of God. In the story of creation, God makes a garden—lush, beautiful, productive, a garden created by God to flourish. And then God places a man

and woman in the garden and tells them to manage the place. Their job is to be God's agents in the creation project. Their job is to live in peace and harmony and obedience to God's will and to see that the garden flourishes. Deep in our tradition is the important idea that God has a plan for the creation, that God assigns to each person the responsibility for the flourishing of creation, and that when human beings take up that responsibility, in whatever form it presents itself, several things happen: God's will is done, and human beings become fulfilled and happy—fulfilled and happy doing what God wants done.

Now for some fortunate people, it is clear. For Jeremiah, it was being God's spokesperson, a prophet. For Yo-Yo Ma, it's playing a cello: you can't imagine him doing anything else. For Derrek Lee, it's hitting a baseball, long and hard and—please, God—often. For Georgia O'Keefe, painting bold, beautiful, irresistible flowers; for John McCain, Hillary Clinton, Barack Obama, politics, running for office.

For some it's clear: it's simply doing what one is clearly equipped and gifted to do. Others have to wrestle with it. One of the classics in the literature on the topic is Ranier Maria Rilke's *Letters to a Young Poet,* who apparently is struggling with whether to be a writer: "No one can advise you," Rilke wrote. "Go into yourself. . . . Confess whether you would have to die if you were forbidden to write. . . . If one feels one could live without writing, then one shouldn't write at all" ("Letter One," *Letters to a Young Poet*).

That's one way: ask yourself if you can imagine not—playing the cello, arguing the case, teaching the class, nurturing the child. Another way, based on the idea that doing what God wants you to do will make you happy and fulfilled, is to identify what makes you feel happy and fulfilled. Social science is paying a lot of attention to that topic these days. Dan Gilbert, who teaches at Harvard, is known as Professor Happiness. He does research on the subject: what happiness is and how to get some. One of his major findings is that the best predictor of happiness is human relationships and how much time a person spends with family and friends. Professor Gilbert observes the irony that a lot of people "sacrifice social relationships to get other things that won't make them as happy." Who hasn't been guilty of that—of missing a child's recital or track meet, a concert with a friend, a dinner party, in order to stay late at work. "You couldn't pay me $100,000 to miss a play date with my granddaughters," Professor Gilbert writes (*New York Times,* 20 April 2008).

The *Economist* recently did a feature about Arthur Brooks and his intriguing book *Gross National Happiness*, in which he observes that while we are obsessed with happiness, taking care of ourselves, feeling good, that the current cultural obsession nonetheless is making people feel miserable. "The surest way to buy happiness," Mr. Brooks argues, "is to give some of

your time and money away," to forget about yourself for a while and, in the words of our commentator, "Live boldly, give generously!" (*The Economist*, 29 March 2008).

Ellen Charry, who teaches philosophy and theology at Princeton Seminary, is, with a grant from the Templeton Foundation, tracing the roots of happiness within our religious tradition. Sometimes we think that religion is grim business—sad, having to do with pain and suffering and self denial. Not so, Dr. Charry says. Very near the center is happiness. The first word in the Psalter is "Happy." Matthew uses "happy" to describe taking the yoke of Jesus. Augustine said happiness is the goal of life, and Thomas Aquinas said happiness is always related to virtue—doing the good. Becoming the best person we can become, learning to love well, Professor Charry suggests, is to be happy.

I was intrigued to read an essay about that, "No Return," by Scott Neeson. It's in a book edited by Bob Abernethy and William Bole, *The Life of Meaning*, taken from the PBS program *Religion and Ethics Newsweekly.* Scott Neeson was president of Twentieth Century Fox and living a charmed life in Hollywood. Known for taking interesting vacations, he found himself backpacking in Cambodia, where he saw street children begging for handouts and trolling the dumps for anything to sell—and for food. It got to him, deeply. He organized the Cambodia Children's Fund, a school and home, started to raise money from his friends, and began "shuttle philanthropy," traveling back and forth between Phnom Penh and Hollywood. He describes what happened one day:

> The phone rang. The actor who was on tour was having a serious meltdown because the private jet didn't have the right amenities for him, and he didn't want to get on that jet. . . . His staff told me that life wasn't meant to be this difficult. . . . And I thought, I don't want this to be my world. Here we've got the jet sitting on the tarmac and I'm sitting with these dying children and I just wanted to scream into the phone, "Come down here for a day and see what it's all about."

He reflects, "I sort of enjoyed [my life], but I wasn't happy." So he quit, "climbed down the corporate ladder," works full-time for the Cambodian Children's Fund, and says, "I've never been happier in my life. . . . I get up in the morning and I can't wait to get to work. How many people can say that?" (pp. 390–392).

Not everyone can do that, obviously. Some particularly blessed souls, and I count myself among them, get paid to do what they most love doing. And some must earn their living in order to do what most makes them happy. And some work all their lives and are never sure that what they are doing amounts to anything or makes any difference at all. That's the case for a lot

of good people. Perhaps you're one of them. I want to think about it for a minute.

I was privileged to work once with a retired missionary, Arthur Romig. I've mentioned him before. We became great friends. Art was born in China of missionary parents, educated in the United States, returned with his wife, Helen, to China as a missionary pastor, was imprisoned by the Japanese during World War II, returned to China again after the war, and was expelled following the communist takeover. We talked a lot about his experience, the churches he had led in China, the schools, the people. As far as he knew, it was all gone: the churches outlawed, the schools closed, the hospitals nationalized after the communist revolution. On occasion, he wondered out loud if his work had amounted to anything, whether what he had spent the best years of his life doing had made any difference at all. I was reminded of Art recently reading David Halberstam's *The Coldest Winter: America and the Korean War*. Halberstam was describing the political trauma in our country at that time when China became communist. Many simply could not accept it and held onto the hope that Chiang Kai-shek and the Chinese nationalists, who had retreated to Taiwan, would return to the mainland and reclaim the old China. A strong leader of the "China Lobby" was Henry Luce, founder of *Time* magazine, also the son of Presbyterian missionaries. When someone challenged Mr. Luce, he responded so poignantly, "You've got to remember that we were born there. This is all we've known. We had made a lifetime commitment to the advancement of Christianity in China. . . . You're asking us to say that our lives were wasted, they've been futile. They've been lived for nothing."

No, Mr. Luce. No, Art. Your work is not in vain. St. Paul said that, by the way, when he was trying to explain the meaning of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. "Be steadfast, immovable, . . . because you know that in the Lord your work is not in vain." Christianity is alive and well and growing aggressively in China. But even if it weren't, there is something amazing, something mysterious going on.

God uses what we do for God's purposes. God takes up the work of our hands, whatever it is—building buildings and automobiles, growing corn and soybeans and bright red geraniums, birthing and nurturing the children, teaching the class, selling stocks and bonds, healing the sick, sitting with the lonely, touching the untouchable, comforting the grieving—God takes all of it and weaves it into the creation project to make a beautiful tapestry that will be completed in God's good time.

I never heard it described more beautifully than this, by N. T. Wright:

> Every act of love . . .; every work of art or music . . .; every minute teaching . . .; every act of care and nurture . . .; every prayer, every deed

> that spreads the gospel and builds up the church . . . all of this will find its way, through the resurrecting power of God, into the new creation that God will one day make.

God has put us here to add in some way to the flourishing of creation. God has summoned us to learn to love well, to give generously, to live boldly. And God has promised that lives lived like that are lives that are full, lives that are deeply happy.

Thanks be to God.